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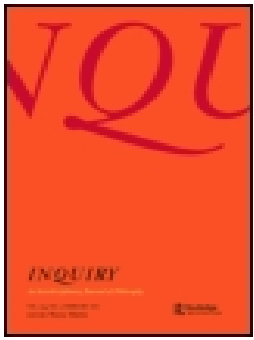
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The value of genealogies for political philosophy

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ABSTRACT



Genealogies are an increasingly important part of contemporary political philosophy. However, even recent genealogies differ a great deal in terms of their ends and methods. Strikingly, this has received virtually no discussion in the literature. This article begins to fill that gap. It does so by comparing and contrasting the genealogies of Bernard Williams, Quentin Skinner, and Raymond Geuss, exploring their different goals, methods, and value for political philosophy. This helps us better understand these different kinds of genealogy in their own right; shows the distinct value of each of these different kinds of genealogy to political philosophy; and enables political philosophers to better be able to select the kind of genealogical investigation most relevant to their interests and to employ the correct kind of genealogy better as a result.

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1. Introduction

Genealogies are an increasingly important part of contemporary political philosophy (Alexander 2019; Koopman 2019, 2013; Srinivasan 2019; Clifford 2013; Bevir 2008; Halpern 2002; Geuss 2003; Williams 2002; Skinner 2002; Jesse Prinz 2016; Biebricher 2016). The different kinds of investigation that 'genealogy' is used to refer to, and what their goals are, vary considerably. Although both Nietzschean (Nietzsche 2017; Schacht 1994; Owen 2007; Leiter 2002; Leiter and Sinhababu 2007; May 1999, 2011) and Foucauldian (Foucault 1995, 1978; Lemke 2019; Visker 1995; Clifford 2001; Saar 2007) genealogies are by now reasonably

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well-understood, the same cannot be said for more recent variants. Strikingly, this fact has received virtually no explicit discussion in the literature. This article begins to fill that gap. Rather than asking ‘what genealogy is’, on the assumption that there is a single set of necessary and sufficient conditions that they all share, we look at three different kinds of genealogy used by contemporary political thinkers and investigate what value these genealogies hold for political philosophy: Raymond Geuss’ genealogy of privacy (Geuss 2003), Bernard Williams’ genealogy of the virtues of truth and truthfulness (Williams 2002), and Quentin Skinner’s genealogy of the concept of the state (Skinner 2008). As already suggested, we focus on these three because they are nowhere near as well-understood as their Nietzschean and Foucauldian counterparts; because despite their close connections in space, time, and institution they are in fact strikingly different; and because focusing on these three will therefore be the most useful for enhancing the genealogical toolbox available to political philosophers.¹

Analysing these three contemporary forms of genealogy will thus make the following contributions to the literature. Firstly, we show that Geuss, Williams, and Skinner – despite their social, geographical, and historical proximity – develop genealogies that employ rather different methods or approaches to achieve different ends. Secondly, exploring the differences and similarities between these genealogies will help us to better understand the genealogies they offer, along with the differing methods they employ. Thirdly, our analysis will provide us with a better understanding of the distinct value or usefulness that each of them have for political philosophy. This will in turn, fourthly, enable political philosophers interested in using the tools of genealogy to better select and make use of the kind(s) of genealogy most appropriate to their needs and interests.

The article is structured as follows. Section 2 argues that what we call Raymond Geuss’ ‘genealogy as critique’ offers an accurate historical account which is designed to challenge our unreflective notion of a single, unitary, and historically constant public/private distinction – though without offering a representative map of different conceptions of it. This is supposed to cause readers to re-think how they conceptualise the distinction and to act better politically as a result. We go on to argue

¹Part of the reason for this is, in turn, that especially Geuss and Williams have written explicitly about the methodology of contemporary political philosophy, making their work on genealogy perhaps more interesting thereto. Another thing that connects these thinkers is their broad adherence, especially in Geuss’ and Williams’ case, to realism in political philosophy (on which see Janosch Prinz 2016; Raekstad 2018; Rossi 2019; Rossi and Sleat 2014). Geuss’ and Williams’ genealogies in particular has formed the basis for recent radical realist genealogies, though this is not something we can pursue in this paper (but see Prinz and Rossi 2017 and Rossi and Argenton *Forthcoming*).

that this kind of genealogy is particularly useful both for non-moralizing political criticism and for forming a valuable part of certain ideology critiques. Section 3 examines Bernard Williams' imaginary genealogy, as carried out in *Truth and Truthfulness*. Among other things, this kind of genealogy is primarily a kind of thought-experiment, rather than focusing on a historically accurate or representative account of the development of a value, concept, or practice (though accurate history certainly does have a role to play) and it seeks to affirm and reinforce our faith in what it investigates, rather than to challenge it. We argue that this kind of genealogy is particularly useful for providing positive support for values, concepts and practices in ways that make sense to us, avoid appeal to potentially tricky ideas of 'real interests', and that respect the fundamentally collective nature of such political phenomena and their value. Section 4 discusses what we call Quentin Skinner's genealogy as conceptual mapping and reconstruction. Unlike the other two, this aims to be an accurate historical investigation that provides a representative map of the main concepts of the state within a particular social and historical context. It combines critique and vindication by criticising some of those concepts and vindicating one of them. We argue that this kind of genealogy contributes to political philosophy by uncovering different historical concepts we were unaware of and that may be of use to us; helps us to understand those concepts by explaining how they arose and were used in the past; and offers a positive normative argument for why we should abandon our currently dominant concept of the state for another one. Finally, we conclude by reflecting on our analysis and how it contributes to enhancing the toolbox available to political philosophers.

2. Genealogy as critique: Raymond Geuss' *public Goods, Private Goods*

Raymond Geuss' most extensive genealogy is titled *Public Goods, Private Goods*.² In it, Geuss aims to challenge what he takes to be our commonly held adherence to the notion of a single, unitary, and constant public/private distinction. He writes:

I wish to argue that there is no single clear distinction between public and private but rather a series of overlapping contrasts, and thus that the distinction

²In the English edition, Geuss does not talk of his work here in terms of genealogy. However, the German title (*Privatheit: Eine Genealogie*) has the word 'genealogy' in the title, and we should also note that what Geuss is doing here does roughly fit much of how he describes Nietzsche's genealogy in contrast to tracing a pedigree in (Geuss 1999). He also describes genealogy as a method in Geuss 2005, 153-160, Geuss 2004, 115-122, and Geuss 2008, 68.

between the public and the private should not be taken to have the significance often attributed to it. One result of this, I think, should be a change in the way we think about the good in various public and private contexts. (Geuss 2003, 6)

For Geuss, the public/private distinction is 'an ideological concretion' (Geuss 2003, 9). It has come about through a number of disparate components 'from different sources and belonging to different spheres' coming together 'historically in an unclear way', and which have 'accumulated around themselves a kind of capital of self-evidence, plausibility, and motivational force' (Geuss 2003, 9). This distinction is often used unreflectively, which 'restricts our possibilities of perceiving and understanding our world' and can help 'undeserving' features of the world and courses of action to seem better than they ought to be (Geuss 2003, 9).

To remedy this, Geuss does not sketch the historical development of the public/private distinction³, but instead looks at four instances where something like the private/public distinction appears in Western history. These instances are supposed to be historically accurate of course, but they do not, and are not intended to, trace out the historical development of the public/private distinction (in Europe or elsewhere), provide a representative view of the different public/private distinctions within a particular social and historical context, or lay bare the drives, forces, and motivations underlying this development. The first instance he discusses is Diogenes of Sinope's public masturbation in the Athenian marketplace, why it was found to be offensive by his peers at the time, and why he might have been driven to do it. Other instances of the public/private distinction that Geuss discusses feature Julius Caesar's decision to defy the Roman Senate, St. Augustine's retreat from public life to contemplate his private spirituality, and the tension between modern liberalism's emphasis on the protection of privacy and the availability of a rationally communicable public good.

This genealogy shows that there 'is no such thing as the public/private distinction', insofar as there is no 'single substantive distinction here that can be made to do any real philosophical or political work' (Geuss 2003, 106). This does not, however, mean that the public/private distinction has, or that Geuss takes it to have, no meaning or value, past or present. Rather, it means that this meaning is shown to be historically varied and contingent, destroying the oft-held implicit assumption that there is a

³He therefore writes that 'I need not (and do not) claim either historical or conceptual completeness for my account' (Geuss 2003, 10).

single, unitary, and historically constant distinction of this kind throughout Western (or broader human) history.

In sum, the genealogy that Geuss offers in *Public Goods, Private Goods* is an attempt at accurate history; and it has the aim of challenging or critiquing our convictions in a significant way – in this case, our unreflective usage of, and commitment to, a single, unitary, and historically constant public/private distinction. It does this by inviting the reader to consider a brief and explicitly selective account of the history of an important political conceptual distinction. This account evokes a crisis in the reader's self-understanding by making them realise that their seemingly familiar and well-understood concept is much more historically varied, incoherent, and confused than they thought. The disturbance this causes drives the reader to reflect upon their own hitherto-uncritical usage of the concept.⁴ This is supposed, in turn, to lead the reader to increase their understanding of the political world, in particular the complications of this particular concept or distinction, to come to use the concept in a better-informed and more sophisticated way, and to improve some of their political judgments and actions as a result. As such, this kind of genealogy does not and need not map a range of different concepts or ideas relevant to the object under investigation in a systematic or representative way. Unlike some genealogies, in particular Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morality* (Nietzsche 2017), there is also no systematic attempt at uncovering the forces, drives, and motivations behind the development of the public/private distinction in different contexts.

This kind of genealogy is, however, critical in a particular way. By changing how we understand important concepts, genealogies of this kind enable a form of critique that does not itself argue for a particular evaluative judgment of any particular practice, institution, or proposal of the kind 'X is undesirable/impermissible because of a', such as 'corporate collection of cell-phone data is undesirable/impermissible because it violates our right to privacy'. Rather, it alters the conceptual frameworks we use to make such judgments, by making us rethink what e.g. a 'right to privacy' does and should amount to. More broadly, the way that such genealogies reveal the historical variation and contingency of a concept, in this case of any public/private distinction, helps to open up the reader's imagination to alternatives to and within the present (see Janosch Prinz 2016). By showing us how other people have thought of things differently,

⁴It might be argued that genealogies of this kind therefore tend to, and perhaps even should, be presented at least partly in an exaggerated or hyperbolic form (Saar 2007). By contrast, a non-critical genealogy would take an exclusively and soberly hermeneutical form closer to Bevir's (2008) approach.

they show us that we too can think of them differently. This in turn prepares the ground for considering how current social arrangements, including power relations, help to shape the formation and current meaning of it for us and how these social arrangements might distort our understanding of it.

Genealogy as critique is therefore particularly suitable for supporting ideology critique. We have just shown how it reveals the contingent and contradictory nature of current concepts that tend to appear natural or otherwise self-evident. Genealogy as critique thus plays a problematising role, offering a stimulus to critically examining the concepts they take for granted (see also Koopman 2013 and Saar 2007). This problematising role is important and valuable to political philosophy. However, political philosophy requires not just problematisation; it also needs to make concrete judgments, or at least offer guidance to agents making concrete judgments for themselves. We will argue that genealogy as critique can do this through the role it plays in certain kinds of ideology critique.

On the face of it, this claim may seem hard to sustain. For instance, David Owen (2002, 19) argues that genealogy and ideology critique address very different problems. Genealogy addresses the problem of the contingent historical limitation of one's perspective, whilst ideology critique usually is taken to address a distortion of consciousness for the benefit of particular agents.⁵ If genealogy and ideology critique attempt to address such different problems, what role can the former play in and for the latter?

At its best, ideology critique seeks to change both our understanding of a certain social phenomenon (religion, capitalism, and so on) and the phenomenon itself. The latter can be taken as a continuation of the former, insofar as changing how we understand and make sense of a social phenomenon will be an important part of, and often a necessary condition for, changing it.⁶ In classical Marxism, for instance, the critique of capitalist ideology is supposed to change workers' understanding of capitalism, including their own role within it, as part of a process of consciousness-raising which will help them go on to replace capitalism with socialism (Lukács 1971). In this way, the critique of capitalist ideology is supposed to provide what Geuss calls 'enlightening emancipation' from

⁵For the sake of argument, we can accept this distinction as stated by Owen (2002). We would quibble a bit with his definition of ideology critique, but that would require too detailed discussion to deserve a place here.

⁶We would like to thank an anonymous referee for pressing us on this point.

the ideological shackles of capitalism, which in turn supports a process of 'real emancipation' from capitalism itself (Geuss 1981, 73–75, 86).

Our argument is that genealogy as critique can play two valuable roles for enlightening emancipation. The first role it can play is for political philosophers interested in ideology critique. Here it acts as a kind of fermentation starter (see also Rahel Jaeggi's account of immanent criticism in Jaeggi 2009, 2014). By demonstrating the historical variation and change of important political concepts, genealogy as critique denaturalises them for political philosophers. That is, it shows them to be contingent human creations that have arisen within and responded to different political contexts. To the political philosopher, this shows that they have two features that make them potential subjects of ideology critique. First, it shows that they are capable of being altered, eliminated, and/or replaced by human agents in order to better meet their needs and interests. Second, this in turn means that they are potential targets of ideology critique, insofar as ideology critique can help to foster this sort of change (see also Honneth 2000).

The second role that genealogy as critique can play vis-à-vis ideology critique is played with respect to the agents addressed by the latter. In fact, brief genealogies as critique are common parts of many ideology critiques. Thus, brief genealogies of capitalism are common in a lot of Marxist ideology critiques precisely because they are supposed to show that capitalism is a historically contingent human creation that was preceded by other social formations, that was introduced by human action to replace such previous formations, and thus is, at least in principle, open to being replaced by human action in the future. Indeed, such accounts are present throughout Marx's own political economy, in part to drive home this important insight and thus to denaturalise capitalism to his readers (Marx 1990, 163–77). The point here is that the denaturalising effects of genealogy as critique – showing certain phenomena to be historically varied, contingent, and often confused – helps to enable the addressees of ideology critiques to be able to view their ways of understanding these phenomena as open to change and possibly affected by power relations in unacceptable ways. This in turn makes it possible for them to consider the subsequent main arguments of the ideology critique, which typically show that certain values, concepts, and ways of understanding have been unacceptably distorted by certain power relations.

Genealogy as critique is therefore valuable to political philosophy in at least two major ways: as a fermentation starter for ideology critics and as

a valuable part of a work of ideology critique itself. Notwithstanding Owen's argumentation, genealogy and ideology critique can go hand in hand in a mutually supportive and reinforcing way. The right sort of genealogy can both spark and constitute a valuable part of ideology critique.

2. Imaginary genealogy: Bernard Williams' *Truth and Truthfulness*

Bernard Williams' *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* takes a very different approach. The aim of what Williams calls 'imaginary genealogy' (Williams 2002, 32) is to present an 'imagined developmental story, which helps to explain a concept or value or institution by showing ways in which it could have come about in a simplified environment containing certain kinds of interests or capacities, which, relative to the story, are taken as given' (Williams 2002, 21). This is accompanied by a broader definition of what genealogy in general is, to include not only 'a narrative which tries to explain a cultural phenomenon by describing a way in which it came about', but also 'how it could have come about, or might be imagined to have come about' (Williams 2002, 20). He thus includes not only familiar works termed genealogy, but also works which often are not – and were never labelled as such by their authors – such as Hume's account of the origins of justice (Hume 2000, 1999) and Nozick's story about how a minimal state might arise (Nozick 1974).

It follows that this sort of genealogy is fact-defective (Williams 2002, 32) in a particular way. All genealogies are likely to be fact-defective insofar as they are likely to get some facts wrong. Imaginary genealogies, by their very natures, will inevitably be fact-defective in the same ways: they too will contain a story which gets at least some of the facts wrong. However, imaginary genealogies are fact-defective in a more interesting way, insofar as they don't aim at historical accuracy. This is one thing that differentiates this type of genealogy from the others discussed here. The imagined genealogy is not primarily an attempt at developing an accurate picture of how some phenomenon arose in and through history, which particular forces and interests drove its development, or even to map out and reconstruct the basic permutations of important concepts, values, or ideas. Instead, its aim is to develop an imagined story to explain or make sense of a social phenomenon, in Williams' case the value and importance of truth and truthfulness.

Thus, for Williams the purpose of an imaginary genealogy is to explain a cultural phenomenon by explaining how it ‘might be imagined to have come about’ (Williams 2002, 20):

An imaginary genealogy (...) is explanatory because it represents as functional a concept, reason, motivation, or other aspect of human thought and behaviour, where that item was perhaps not previously seen as functional; the explanation of the function is unmysterious, because in particular it does not appeal to intentions or deliberations or (in this respect) already purposive thought; and the motivations that are invoked in the explanation are ones that are agreed to exist anyway. (Williams 2002, 34)

This is not to say that real history plays absolutely no part for Williams’ account. As Mathieu Queloz has rightly pointed out, real history comes in to explain how our actual practices differ from the functional model we require (Queloz 2018a, 7).

Thus, for Williams the purpose of an imaginary genealogy is to explain a cultural phenomenon by building an abstract model of how it ‘might be imagined to have come about’ (Williams 2002, 20) in view of certain interests and capacities which are taken as given, together with an account of how their concrete manifestations – e.g. currently existing conceptions of truthfulness – have been shaped in various ways by more particular, local needs (Queloz 2018b, 4). Thus, if ‘the genealogist ends up with something sufficiently like our local form of the practice in question, he or she will have a reasonable claim to having explained why we might have come by the practice in terms of its original point’ (Queloz 2018b, 4).

Williams’ imaginary genealogy also has a clear vindicatory purpose. Its aim is not to undermine, critique, or challenge our outlook on truth and truthfulness; it is to reinforce and strengthen that outlook through explaining it in a particular way. It achieves this purpose by telling a kind of just-so story about how a cultural phenomenon (e.g. the disposition toward truthfulness) may have been brought into existence in a community seeking to realise interests that we share. Because we take ourselves to share these interests and capacities, this story in turn tells us why cultivating these social phenomena is valuable to our community – the reasons why these cultural phenomena might have been brought about in a properly constructed imaginary situation reveal to us the reasons why these phenomena are valuable for us.

It’s worth briefly comparing this to his views on what Nietzsche does in his genealogy. Williams argues that Nietzsche’s genealogy of morality has the aim of providing an explanation of morality that those who identify

with that sort of morality cannot accept. If it is accepted, Nietzsche's genealogy is supposed to render this system of morality reflectively unacceptable, driving its adherents to change their outlook (Williams 2002, 37; but see Queloz and Cueni 2019). By contrast, Williams' genealogy is supposed to show 'why truthfulness has an intrinsic value; why it can be seen as such with a good conscience; why a good conscience is a good thing with which to see it' (Williams 2002, 263).

In summary, unlike Geuss' (above) or Skinner's (below), Williams' imaginary genealogy is not primarily an attempt at an accurate – much less representative – historical investigation. This is not to deny that there is some accurate history in *Truth and Truthfulness* that plays an important role in his discussion; it only points out that the genealogy itself is not intended to provide a generally accurate historical account of the development of commitments to these phenomena. Williams also does not aim to challenge or critique the convictions that he seeks to explain; instead, his genealogy is an explicit attempt to affirm and reinforce those convictions. Williams' genealogy does not aim to map out and reconstruct a set of concepts or ideas that have existed through time, nor does it aim to uncover the historically contingent drives, forces, or motivations behind the development of what it investigates.

Imaginary genealogy provides at least two valuable contributions to political philosophy that we want to draw attention to. Firstly, it shows how genealogical investigation can be used not only to undermine or challenge our faith in our existing political values and concept, but also to provide positive support for them. In contrast to genealogies as critique, imaginary genealogies can lend positive justification for those values, concepts, and practices that pass its test. It does this by explaining how they might have come about in response to powers and interests we agree to take for granted, and thus in response to the positive function they have for us. This expands our understanding of what genealogy can achieve, showing us how it can be used to provide positive legitimations for values, concepts, and practices. It can also, by informing political agents about e.g. which practices are legitimate and which values they should adhere to, help to guide their actions in constructive ways.

Furthermore, these justifications respect and give voice to the fundamentally collective dimension of politics. Imaginary genealogies are able to justify political values as properly political values – that is, as values that are intrinsically about certain kinds of collective practices. A great deal of real politics is concerned not with the principles that should guide individual actions, but with broader ethical concerns about what

kinds of collective practices we should value, cultivate, support, change, or eliminate. Imaginary genealogies reflect this through their focus on the ‘reasons for the collective to *cultivate certain practices*, rather than reasons for the individual to participate in those practices’ (Queloz 2018b, 19). Some genealogies may provide reasons why the individual ought to participate in those practices, but imaginary genealogies of Williams’ kind don’t necessarily and Williams’, as Queloz points out, does not. Rather, what imaginary genealogies do is give reasons for why it makes sense for *collectives* to adopt or cultivate the practices in question, and these reasons need not reduce to the reasons individuals have for participating in them. While Queloz views this collective perspective as a limitation of the ability of genealogy to change an individual’s space of reasons (2018b, 19), we instead view it as a strength. The inherently collective nature of its explanation for our political values, concepts, and practices enables imaginary genealogy to justify them as properly political values (Hall 2017; Raekstad 2018; Williams 2005).

Secondly, imaginary vindictory genealogy provides a novel way to relate the normative and explanatory dimensions of political philosophy. Normative and explanatory dimensions are often strictly kept apart in political philosophy whose concept of normativity has Neo-Kantian roots (Beiser 2009). This separation has arguably led much contemporary normative political philosophy to grow stale and disconnected from, and therefore increasingly irrelevant to, political realities in a way that a lot of other even fairly recent political philosophy (e.g. in the works of Friedrich Hayek on the right or Herbert Marcuse on the left) was not.

Imaginary genealogy brings the normative into connection with the explanatory by linking its justifications of values, concepts, and practices to explanations of how they in fact satisfy our capacities and interests. One of the advantages of doing this is that it offers a way of bringing together empirical considerations of whether certain values, concepts, and practices satisfy or realise interests we take ourselves to have with the normative question of whether we should judge them to be legitimate. Another of its advantages is that it avoids reference to the notoriously difficult notion of ‘objective interests’ (see Geuss 1981, chapter 3) as a basis for its normative assessments. This offers a constructive – limited, but powerful – way of bridging the empirical-normative divide in order to say something concrete about what real political agents should value and be guided by.

3. Genealogy as conceptual mapping and reconstruction: Quentin Skinner's 'a genealogy of the modern state'

Finally, for Skinner, tracing the genealogy of a concept is a way of uncovering 'the different ways in which it may have been used in earlier times', through which we 'equip ourselves with a means of reflecting critically on how it is currently understood' (Skinner 2008, 325). In 'A Genealogy of the Modern State', he sets out to do just this for the modern concept of the state. More precisely, he analyses how the word 'state' came to figure in debates about public power in 'Anglophone traditions of thought' (Skinner 2008, 325) during the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries.

Skinner distinguishes between four different concepts of the 'state' during this period. Towards the end of the 16th and beginning of the seventeenth century, the 'absolutist' concept of the state develops, according to which the state is thought of in terms of a group of people gathered together as a body, subject to the will of a monarch as the head (of the body/community) (Skinner 2008, 328–32). The state is here transformed from an earlier meaning in terms of a state of affairs or condition which the prince or monarch should preserve, to a notion of a body politic, of which the prince or monarch is the head and which the latter should keep secure and healthy. This goes along with a particular notion of legitimacy, according to which actions are legitimate iff they are performed by the rightful head of state. In the beginning of the seventeenth century, this was challenged by the populist concept of the state, according to which the state is (as on the absolutist conception) a community of people under a government, but where sovereignty rests with the community as a whole, rather than with a prince or monarch (Skinner 2008, 332–40). On this view, actions are legitimate iff they are performed in the right sort of way by the will of the people.

Both of these are challenged by Hobbes' development of what Skinner calls the fictional concept of the state (Skinner 2008, 341–48). Hobbes rejects the populist idea that sovereign power originally rested in a community of people, because, he argues, no such united community exists in the original state of nature. He also rejects the absolutist conception of individual citizens as passive members of the state, arguing that their consent is essential for establishing sovereign power and that they remain the authors of its actions. As is well known, Hobbes argues that people in the state of nature covenant together to confer sovereign power on either one person or an assembly. In so doing, the covenant brings into being two new persons who did not exist in the state of

nature. First, by covenanting together we transform ourselves from a multitude 'into a unified group', establishing an artificial person, the sovereign, 'to whom we grant authority to speak and act in our name' (Skinner 2008, 345). Second, 'when we acquire a single will and voice by way of authorising a man or assembly to serve as our representative', we bring a new fictional person into being, namely the state (Skinner 2008, 345). The state is 'fictional' in the sense that it never acts or accepts responsibility for its actions except through its representative, the sovereign. Thus, according to Hobbes the act of covenanting establishes two new composite persons: the fictional person of the state and the artificial person of the sovereign as its representative. On Hobbes' view, actions are legitimate iff they (1) are undertaken by a sovereign properly authorised to speak and act on behalf of the state and (2) aim to preserve the life and health of the state, 'and hence the common good or public interest of its subjects not merely at the time of acting but in perpetuity' (Skinner 2008, 348).

Fourth and finally, from the end of the eighteenth century this is challenged by the reductionist concept of the state, according to which the 'state' is simply reduced to any apparatus of government or the persons in charge of it (Skinner 2008, 355–60).

Skinner argues that this genealogy shows that the word 'state' has never corresponded to any one single, unitary, and constant concept, revealing its 'contingent and contestable character' along with the 'impossibility of showing that it has any essence or natural boundaries', and suggesting that this is probably inevitable for any concept so 'enmeshed in ideological disputes' over such a long time (Skinner 2008, 326). Today, he thinks, both populist and absolutist concepts of the state are of merely historical interest. We are thus often left with a reductionist view of the state, but would profit from turning to the fictional one instead (Skinner 2008, 361). Skinner goes on to argue that we should adopt a fictional concept of the state, because it better brings to the fore and emphasises the necessity of preserving the safety and health of the state for assessing the legitimacy of its actions (especially in times of emergency) and 'to make sense of the claim that some government actions have the effect of binding not merely the body of the people but their remote posterity' (Skinner 2008, 363), as when the state incurs public debts which it is later – when under the direction of an entirely new set of people – expected to respect.

In sum, Skinner's genealogy of the concept of the state is an attempt at a historically accurate account of how this concept arose, at least in 'Anglo-phone traditions of thought' (Skinner 2008, 325). Like Geuss', Skinner's

genealogy makes no systematic attempt at uncovering the drives, forces, and motivations behind this concept's development. However, unlike Geuss', Skinner's genealogy of the state does provide a certain map of relevant concepts and ideas, as well as of their development and it aims at a certain kind of representativeness in its account, insofar as it attempts to map out the main concepts of the state within a particular social and historical context. In its emphasis on both critique and vindication – critiquing the reductionist concept of the state and advocating the fictional one – Skinner's genealogy falls somewhere between Geuss' genealogy as critique and Williams' imaginary (vindictory) genealogy.

What is the value of Skinner's brand of genealogy for political philosophy? Like Geuss', Skinner's genealogy of the state disaggregates its concept, showing that there is no one single concept of the state, but instead a number of distinct ones, each with its own advantages and drawbacks. Unlike Williams' kind of genealogy, Skinner's approach doesn't rescue a single thing – such as a single concept of the state – as the one that has been around for a long time, that is still at work in our thoughts and practices in some way, and show us why it is valuable and worth holding on to. This is part of Skinner's broader historical project of preventing that we 'fall under the spell of our own intellectual heritage', deploying history to 'help to liberate us from the grip of any one hegemonial account of those values and how they should be interpreted and understood' (Skinner 2002, 6). By showing us 'the essential variety of moral assumptions and political commitments' (Skinner 2002, 88), this 'frees us to re-evaluate what we once believed' (Frazer 2019, 92).

However, Skinner's genealogy as conceptual mapping and reconstruction is much more constructive than Geuss' genealogy as critique is. This is because Skinner's genealogy offers a clear and explicit positive proposal: after examining a number of different concepts of the state, he argues that one of these concepts – the fictional one – is superior not only to its historical competitors, but also to our currently dominant concept of the state for good normative reasons. As we have seen, Skinner argues that we should embrace the fictional conception of the state over our current one because (i) it better emphasises the necessity of preserving the safety and health of the state for assessing the legitimacy of its actions – especially, but not only, during times of emergency – and (ii) it is more useful for 'mak[ing] sense of the claim that some government actions have the effect of binding not merely the body of the people but their remote posterity', such as signing international treaties or

taking on debts (Skinner 2008, 363). This in effect revalues the state through driving us, the genealogy's audience, to reconceptualise it.

Skinner's brand of genealogy is an instance of constructive conceptual reform or development, which in turn has valuable implications for making normative judgments about the legitimacy of state action. If Skinner is right, one of the advantages of the fictional concept of the state is that adopting it improves our ability to make normative judgments about the legitimacy of state actions and to judge the normative nature and implications of some of the state's most important actions, namely when it performs actions that bind the body of the people into posterity. Although Skinner's genealogy itself doesn't go on to make these judgments, it provides political philosophers with valuable tools – and persuasive arguments for the value and usefulness of specifically those tools – which they can employ when developing normative principles for assessing the legitimacy of state action and judging state action in accordance with these principles. This genealogy thereby contributes to contemporary theories of legitimacy.

This view is not uncontroversial. For instance, Michael Frazer (Frazer 2019) has recently argued that Skinner's historicist approach to history – which is certainly evident in his genealogy of the state – has some serious ethical shortcomings – many of which are concerned with his particular approach to history, which we won't examine in detail here. The important part of Frazer's argument for our purposes is the argument that when such intellectual history 'intersects with our current concerns', it does so only 'in a negative way', by 'criticizing everything and defending nothing except autonomy itself' (Frazer 2019, 93). The problem with this is that '[a]fter the criticism of tradition is complete, the past can no longer offer the practical wisdom that we once depended on to guide our existence' (Frazer 2019, 93). If this is true of Skinner's genealogy, it would seem to follow that the latter can offer nothing of positive value to political philosophy.

We would argue that Skinner's genealogy does not fall foul of these critiques. As we have seen, Skinner's genealogy offers two normative arguments for the positive value or usefulness of one concept of the state for normative political philosophy. One might respond that one cannot derive an ought from an is – one cannot derive a normative argument for the fictional concept of the state from a descriptive genealogy of how the concept of the state has developed. This general claim is of course true, but Skinner's argument rests on no such fallacy. Rather, Skinner's genealogy provides a descriptive account of different historical

concepts of the state and combines this with normative arguments for why we should adopt one of them over the one that's dominant today. But what, if anything, is then the value of Skinner's genealogy, as distinct from this normative argumentation?

The value of Skinner's brand of genealogy to political philosophy is threefold. First, it uncovers different historical concepts that are of use to us – even more so than the ones we presently employ. Second, it tells us how these concepts arose and how they can be used for certain valuable ends. The latter it does in a rather trivial way: by detailing how these concepts were used to valuable ends in the past, it shows us that, in relevantly similar conditions and *ceteris paribus*, they can be used to such valuable ends today. Third, based on this conceptual mapping and reconstruction we can give normative arguments for why some of these are more valuable to us than those we employ, or employ more commonly, today. In this way, Skinner's genealogy provides a positive and constructive contribution to normative political philosophy.

4. Conclusion: a genealogy of genealogies

The foregoing analysis gives us a picture of three projects that are called 'genealogy' today, by three thinkers who are very close geographically, socially, and historically and who have known and influenced each other in important ways. In spite of this proximity, we have seen that they are strikingly different. While Geuss' genealogy as critique and Skinner's genealogy as conceptual mapping and reconstruction focus on offering accurate historical accounts, Williams' imaginary genealogy instead focuses on a particular kind of thought-experiment. While Skinner's maps relevant meanings of a concept with some claim to being representative of the different variants available among a particular group of people at a particular time, neither Geuss' nor Williams' do. While Geuss' aims to challenge and critique the object of investigation, Williams' instead seeks to vindicate it and reconcile us to it, and Skinner's does a bit of both. This does not mean, and should not be taken to mean, that the concept of genealogy is necessarily empty or devoid of meaning, nor that the concept of genealogy is too confused to warrant continued use. We think that there is still good reason to talk about genealogy in several of its forms, but when we do so we should be clear about precisely *which* of the different kinds of genealogy we are discussing and *what exactly* we are trying to achieve by using it.

One reason for this is that, as we've shown, different genealogies have very different uses as tools of political philosophy. Geuss' genealogy as critique plays a problematising role, stimulating those who read it to think differently about political concepts and to act differently as a result. It is particularly useful for enabling ideology critique, where it can play the role of 'fermentation starter' by denaturalising familiar political concepts and thus revealing them as potential objects of ideology critique. Genealogy as critique also serves as a useful part of the process of ideology critique itself, where it can show that concepts, values, and practices are contingent, subject to historical change and variation, and, potentially distorted by certain power relations in ways identified by the ideology critique proper. Williams' imaginary genealogy enables us to give compelling arguments that combine certain kinds of empirical and normative investigation to justify or vindicate values, concepts, and practices to political agents, reconciling the latter with the former, and thereby provides a very different kind of concrete guidance for their actions. Finally, Skinner's genealogy as conceptual mapping and reconstruction provides us not only with a more comprehensive understanding of conceptual variation and change than the other two, but also a combination of argumentation for one concept and critique of its competitors. These different uses of genealogy for political philosophy are unsurprising: given how very different these genealogies are, it would be shocking indeed if they did, or were supposed to do, the same thing for us. A more complete understanding of the differences between these different genealogical methods or approaches, and the different purposes they serve, enables us to be much more precise about exactly what we are doing when we are practicing different kinds of genealogy.

In a sense, our argument here is itself a form of genealogy, one essentially similar to Geuss' in *Public Goods, Private Goods*. It aims to represent the genealogies of Geuss, Skinner, and Williams in a faithful and accurate way; it doesn't per se aim at representativeness, nor does it involve a hypothetical thought-experiment or aim to affirm or reinforce its object; it aims to challenge or critique its object in a limited way, insofar as it argues that our usage of the term 'genealogy' today does not pick out any one single, coherent, and unified concept which corresponds to it, but a number of importantly different concepts and approaches, which have different uses for political philosophy. However, we do not intend this to furnish any kind of challenge to or critique of genealogy – either in general or particular kinds thereof. Rather, what we have offered should instead help us to be better able to understand and employ

different forms of genealogy in a self-reflexive way – employing the precise kind of genealogy we want for the task to which it is best suited – in turn helping us better make sense of the world around us and perhaps also change it for the better.

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